



July 3, 2008

Burt Sauders: Buying U.S. Sugar land great deal for Florida

Guest Opinion

Gov. Charlie Crist and Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, recently announced that Florida would essentially purchase the assets of U.S. Sugar over six years for \$1.75 billion.

U.S. Sugar would cease sugar farming, and Florida would take title to more than 185,000 acres of sugar farms. The value of this acquisition to Florida and its environment is too great to calculate.

This is an incredible acquisition for many reasons, and Governor Crist is to be commended for his leadership on this.

Florida and the federal government have entered into a 30-year, 50/50 partnership to restore the Everglades National Park. The project has been fully under way for more than 10 years, with Florida investing \$2.5 billion, to date. Our federal partners have contributed only approximately \$360 million, or about 13 percent of the total project cost.

This past legislative session, as chairman of the Senate Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee, I had the honor of introducing legislation to renew Florida's commitment to this project and to commit another \$2 billion over the next 10 years to the effort.

A major component of the restoration effort has been the purchase of lands to build filtration marshes and water retention facilities such as large reservoirs.

Restoring the "River of Grass" requires tremendous amounts of land and water. The experts have long discussed the need to acquire the U.S. Sugar land for restoration to fully succeed. Until the governor announced this land deal, few thought it would ever be financially feasible for the state to acquire these critical lands.

As the population of Florida grows, our citizens have rightfully demanded increased efforts to preserve the natural environmental systems that are so critical to our state's future.

Florida's premier land purchasing program, Florida Forever, was just renewed for another 10 years with bonding capacity expanded to enable the state to purchase another \$3 billion worth of environmentally sensitive lands.

By purchasing development rights and environmental easements, it is hoped that farmers can realize profits from the land while continuing to farm and ranch those lands. Farmers are the best land managers and keeping them in business while we protect their land from development is not only good for the environment but good for our agricultural economy.

These two programs will ensure we do all that we can to preserve our natural environment for future generations of Floridians.

And, this opportunity to purchase 185,000 acres of sugar farms will long be remembered as a watershed moment in Florida's preservation efforts.

This land acquisition will provide not only land necessary for successful restoration, but will result in the cessation of a significant portion of the sugar farming activities that have long been the source of phosphorous and other nutrients polluting the Everglades.

The net positive impact on the Everglades National Park cannot be overstated. This will result in sufficient water supplies for the environment, for farming and for projected population growth.
